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ABSTRACT

Using great literature to clarify and to improve students' writing is like using the unknown-literature to explain the only slightly less unknown--the writing of compositions. An alternative is to study films to foster an awareness of technique, for films contain many of the same rhetorical and structural devices as literature. It is possible to focus attention in film discussions on devices also found in literature, such as theme, narrative organization of time and space, development and presentation of flat and round characters, point of view, use of mood and atmosphere, and symbolism. Specific films may be used to make the connection between film study and student writing, or clips and stills may accomplish the same purpose with less cost. In addition, film critics may be studied as students become aware of differences in critical schools, points of view, and styles of critical writing. (TJ)

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The Celluloid Critic and the Student of Composition

One of the most difficult and challenging moments in teaching composition to students, at least for me, is the moment in the term when we turn to "great" literature as a means of clarifying and improving student writing. We try to spot fine literary uses of description, example, analogy, image, for just a few, in order to encourage a similarly sophisticated literary use in the writing in composition classes. And while we may see that Henry James is a master of point of view, that Chekov can create character with precision and economy, or that Conrad's descriptive powers give us a vivid sense of place, the large problem always remains: how to precisely translate our observations to the concrete reality of student writing. At best, the attempt has proven inspiring and stimulating; at worst it's been an impossible bridge to cross.

For the traditional method, in some ways, still seems a roundabout one; to wit, to have students write about either the author's theme or the particular device they've observed in the literary piece. If Faulkner makes a complexly interesting use of time as a narrative device, the reasoning goes, well then we will create an assignment whereby the student points this out. Then, mirable dictu (or so we hope) the student will then him or herself start using time in a similarly creative fashion. Yet even if we were all hoping for "The Bear" to be turned in (and we're not, for we're teaching expository writing, not creative fiction), a large

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logical leap has still been skipped over. For if an awareness of literary technique can refine our prose style, as of course it can, isn't this ability one that comes cumulatively, after many years of exposure to an awareness of fine literature? Besides, in the face of the language difficulties of so many of the incoming freshman, at least where I teach, it's like using the unknown--literature--to explain the only slightly less unknown--the writing of compositions.

It's much more to the point, it seems to me, to make use of the skills and knowledge which a student already possesses in order to foster an awareness of technique, and, not so parenthetically one hopes, to find exciting topics to write about. It can be both clarifying and innovatively creative to apply an awareness of film techniques and film criticism to teaching composition. For we find many of the same rhetorical and structural devices in films that we have found useful in pointing out in literature. Besides, film devices are simply more familiar to most college students, even if they don't know the precise terminology (though of course in many cases they know it more precisely than we do). For the great film triad of repetition, variety, and simultaneity are easy, especially in the case of the first two, to generally apply to writing techniques, just as other more specific film devices are: narrative organization and time sequence, the image (all direct enough parallels), particularizing detail (the equivalent of specific example), montage (functioning

as a kind of analogy) and the nuances of style of each particular auteur (or essayist). Clips, frames, and stills can be used in class, and of course subject matter for analysis is easy to come by in the form of individual films, and various critics.

To be more precise, a student can write about, and class discussion can center upon, a particular film for the kind of exegesis we're all used to. It's certainly a simple enough matter to refer to what is by now a common cultural knowledge, and discuss the "theme" of Citizen Kane. If calling the theme "egomania" and "distorted perception" seems a little pat, let it pass for the moment in order to visualize how easy this is to exemplify as we talk about the film, and perhaps show photos or stills from it. The young enthusiastic newspaper owner compared to the angry old man who's furiously trying to save his last wife from deserting him, or the by now classic montage and shorthand use of time: the breakfast table showing the dissolution of marriage as Kane and his first wife are shown drawing farther and farther apart as time passes and their marriage collapses. All of this is as "discussable" as our growing awareness of Kurtz's pride and isolation in Heart of Darkness, or of the passage of time in "A Rose for Emily." But literature-to-film similarities aside for the moment, the narrative organization of time and space has the advantage of concrete visualized image wherein we see these changes take place.

More easy to point out in film than in literature is the development and presentation of flat and round characters, if I can rely one more time on E. M. Forster's perhaps too-well-known terminology.

For instance, Fredo, the simple-minded and confused son in Francis Ford Coppola's The Godfather is a reference familiar to most college students which perfectly illustrates this uni-dimensional type, just as Paul, the hero of Last Tango in Paris, is wonderfully susceptible of very many interpretations. But it is in the area of technique that film study can be particularly useful in teaching composition. Where point of view is a concern, as the adoption of a voice always is in writing composition, we need simply to refer to the use of point of view in film. For the selection of voice--first person, omiscient, subjective, or some combination of these--is automatically exemplified in every film. The most obvious example is in the documentary form, and while not all students may be familiar with Flaherty's Nanook of the North, documentary footage is used by even so partisan a film as Lina Wertmuller's Seven Beauties (in fact this particular movie is a fine example of a combined objective and subjective point of view). The coldly observant and objective eye of film can be imitated by and in student writing. So can the first person point of view, and it need not result in any self-indulgent reminiscences on the order of "My Summer Vacation."

The recent film Julia shows us that, whatever criticism has been made of it, the first person "I" is effectively used at both the beginning and conclusion, as Fonda's voice, as Hellman, reads in the beginning, openly declaring the autobiographical and retrospective nature of the film: "Old paint on canvas, as it ages, sometimes becomes transparent. When that happens it is possible, in some pictures, to see the original lines: a tree will show through

a woman's dress, a child makes way for a dog, a large boat is no longer on an open sea. That is called pentimento because the painter repented, changed his mind. Perhaps it would be as well to say that the old conception, replaced by a later choice, is a way of seeing and then seeing agin. The paint has aged now and I wanted to see what was there for me once, what is there for me now." And the film ends with Fonda-Hellman observing, "Hammett didn't outlive me. But he was right. I am stubborn. I haven't forgotten either of them" From observing this use of first person, the student can see than an "I" persona can result in a particularized and clearly organized narrative. Julia is just as effective in presenting autobiographical anecdote as George Orwell's "Shooting An Elephant."

More complicated exposition, employing shifting point of view and levels of time, can be observed in Bertolucci's The Conformist, or Kurasawa's Rashomon. Dislocation in The Conformist, and the relativity of perception in Rashomon, are perhaps more readily graspable than in Mailer's Armies of the Night, which some composition teachers have managed to use to illustrate point of view and perceptual change. And for the sophisticated student writer, these films can serve as examples of the use of multiple persona and the deliberately confused narrator as he or she observes an event.

Nuances of style, too, can be analyzed by an awareness of an auteurist approach in particular, and by pointing out the use of mood and atmosphere in individual filmmakers and films. The more

Bergman films a student has seen, the more he or she will be able to recognize the symbols that appear and re-appear, just as a tense, or film noir-ish atomosphere, is created in films like Don Siegel's. Referring to specific films that are in our common cultural heritage is one classroom technique for making the connection between film study and student writing; another way is by showing clips or stills. If we're at a university that has a film library, we fortunately can turn to that source. But if not, there are other possibilities. I have recently found out that there's a collection of fiteen film clips put together by a publishing group called The Learning Corporation of America. The clips are compiled into a narrative sequence which lasts about fifteen minutes. Of course specific films can be ordered from various rental agencies, but the cost is too frequently prohibitive (Films Inc., with rental offices in major cities, seems cheapest, with prices for individual films running at about $45).

Within the context of film, topics for student papers are no problem at all. In addition, the work of film critics themselves can be used to great advantage in the classroom. Their critical writing will probably be more familiar to most students than the work of literary critics, for some film critics function as reviewers as well--Pauline Kael, Molly Haskell, John Simon, when he's not barred from the critics' circle--to mention just a few. Various reviews and essays which all comment on or give various interpretations of the same film may be compared, and then the student can be assigned to write his or her own review of the

film, or to analyze the essays of the respective critics.

Thus the student can become aware of the existence of different critical schools: the femininism of a Haskell, the sociopopulism of a Kael, the auteurism of an Andrew Sarris. Moreover, the student can also observe that writing style and discursive thought often have much to do with each other; Kael's colloquialisms tie in with her preference for popular film, Simon's highbrow language betrays his extremely high (though some would claim erratic) standards. In looking for a text of film criticism, it is useful to know that the National Society of Film Critics each year publishes a paperback collection of what they consider to be the best film reviews and essays of that particular year. There are historical anthologies of film criticism as well.

Some of our hesitancy in using film, and film criticism, in the classroom has come, I think, from our own lack of self-confidence and failure to recognize our own familiarity with film devices; we're all aware of image, music, and editing techniques like cross-cutting which functions as a kind of comparison and contrast, whether we've consciously formed these thoughts and given these labels or not. And we surely need no introduction to familiar literary concepts like character, narrative structure, dialogue, symbol, some of which occur and reoccur in a kind of filmic leitmotif. It's all there for us--the students know it and we do too--we've just got to make use of it, and implement it.